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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Statement submitted by Mother's Union, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

The Mothers' Union (MU) is an Anglican organisation promoting the well being of families worldwide. Its 3.6 million members in 77 countries are engaged in grassroots initiatives empowering women, families and communities. Our members' experiences and understanding of the situation of girls throughout the world form the basis of this response.

Overview of discrimination and violence against the girl child

Gender roles reflect the long-standing assumptions that a society holds about men, women, boys and girls. These roles may differ from place to place and they may change over time, but they continue to affect all aspects of life ranging from access to resources, public and private responsibilities, and patterns of courtship.

Too often, these socially-constructed roles lead to discrimination against girls on the basis of their gender from the moment they are born, and, in cases such as female foeticide, whilst still in the womb. Many MU members identified unequal social values attached to the birth of girls compared with boys as evidence of such discrimination: 'It begins when they are born. Boys get given 5 ululations and girls only 3. This creates a big gap. Superiority and inferiority are thus created.' (MU Member, Kenya)

The unequal treatment of girls and boys does not stop there but continues throughout childhood and into adulthood. It permeates all sectors of society, be they social, economic or political, and hinders girls' participation in society. The Beijing Platform for Action recognised this fact: 'Girls often have less access to nutrition, physical and mental health care, and education and enjoy fewer rights, opportunities, and benefits of childhood and adolescence than boys.'

Such discrimination lies at the heart of the girl child's greater vulnerability to violence, because violence against her reinforces gender hierarchies. Although all violence against all children is a violation of human rights, gender-based violence requires specific attention to ensure that the girl child is protected.

Situations where discrimination and violence against the girl child occur

Gender-based discrimination and violence occur in both the public and private spheres, transcending the boundaries of nation, culture, race and religion. MU members noted several sectors of society where gender-based discrimination occurs:

In the family

Many MU members pointed out that gender roles are learnt first in the family. Indeed, the Mothers' Union has long stated that 'equality between men and women...begins in the family.' Although it is impossible to disconnect gender discrimination in the family from that reflected in all other contexts, the family is a specific forum for gender-based discrimination that is particularly hard

to challenge. This is because certain social norms and cultures can protect privacy and male domination within the family at the expense of girls and women, and are or can be perpetuated by women.

The most frequent manifestation of discrimination that MU members cited was the unequal division of domestic work. They recognised how this can thwart a girl's potential, particularly in terms of education: 'Even if a girl goes to school just as boys do, she will come back home and do all the domestic work, like fetching water, cooking, washing plates, sweeping the home, while the boy is doing his homework, and afterwards he will sit and wait for food to be brought to him by the girl.' (MU Member, Uganda)

Members noted that pressures on a family's finances, through school fees and hidden costs for school equipment, can exacerbate preferences for boys' education over girls. However, it was not only in poorer countries where a difference in gender roles in the home manifested itself: 'I have to tidy my bedroom and go shopping with my Mum, but my brother hardly ever goes shopping unless it is to get something for himself and Mum tidies his bedroom for him.' (Girl child, 11 years, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

Other types of social, cultural and economic discrimination or violence that MU members stated as being perpetuated by families included:

- lack of inheritance rights
- sexual and physical abuse
- female genital mutilation (FGM)
- lack of education about sex and puberty
- early/forced marriage
- lack of decision-making power
- girls' nutritional or health needs being less important than boys'

At school

Not only does gender-based discrimination prevent girls from attending and remaining at school, it also hinders girls' full participation at school. One MU member from Nigeria recalled one of her experiences as a child: 'When I was in primary school, my teacher (male) said I couldn't be the class leader because I was a girl. He noted that I was not supposed to lead the boys in my class.' Several MU members remarked how education syllabi can stereotype gender roles and how girls can be pushed to study subjects perceived to be 'female' as opposed to ones perceived as 'male'. In addition, school is an environment where discrimination and violence against girls can be perpetrated by their peers - be they boys or girls.

In the community

One common worry among MU members was the safety of girls as they move from place to place in their communities. One girl in the United Kingdom testified; 'everyday when I walk to school, older men in vans, lorries and cars shout rude comments at me.' Several members cited cases where such threatening behaviour had turned into actual physical and sexual harm of girls.

Other members noted that certain interpretations of girls' roles may exclude them from equal and active participation in community life: 'Girls don't participate in meetings or games or sports, because according to culture a well-educated girl is the one who stays at home.' (MU members, Rwanda) Many rued the lack of female role models in leadership positions as a means for combating such beliefs, be that in religious, political or employment spheres. And the media was held up as having a major responsibility for the promotion of a positive image of girls, and indeed women. MU Members felt that current media culture puts excessive emphasis on physical appearance, which leads to girls' low-self esteem and the objectifying of girls and women.

However, the most commonly cited challenges facing girls in their communities were those of multiple social-exclusion. This means that discrimination is not only based on gender but also on colour, race, religion, politics, ethnic origin or disability. Such girls are more vulnerable to discrimination and violence because their gender exaggerates the fact that they are already less likely to access quality and relevant education and more likely to be trafficked, exposed to hazardous work and sexual exploitation. The same is true for girls facing poverty, conflict, social instability and preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

How to eliminate discrimination and violence against the girl child

The Mothers' Union is committed to eliminating discrimination and violence against the girl child through its members' own work in their communities and through lobbying governments. To this end, the Mothers' Union promotes four principles for governments, NGOs and individuals alike:

An holistic approach

As well as developing specific strategies to address the unequal power relations leading to girls' greater vulnerability to discrimination and violence, gender equality must be seen as a central part of all social transformation efforts. Unless poverty eradication policies, for example, also address the inequality of gender roles, success will be slow and uneven – both in terms of gender equality and in terms of poverty eradication.

An empowering approach

Education is the principle tool for the elimination of discrimination and violence against girls. Education here not only means the formal education of girls, but also the education of society at large including parents. MU members noted that little awareness about gender issues among girls and women themselves is particularly disempowering: 'The main problem is that they (women) do not feel equal because they have had it hammered into them for hundreds of years.' (MU member, United Kingdom)

An inclusive approach

The Mothers' Union has long advocated that gender equality is not just about women; it is about women and men, and can only be achieved with the partnership of men. However, in the context of

the girl child, many MU members pointed out that it is not just men who must join the fight against gender discrimination, but other women as well. Many felt that women can stand in the way of the advancement of girls and demanded that 'women should stop being enemies of their fellow women'. (MU Member, Kenya)

A partnership approach

Many MU members praised the positive impact that new laws had had on the situation of girls in their communities; free primary education, equal opportunities legislation and punishment for sex offenders. Yet, although some governments still have a long way to go in terms of legislation and enforcement, governments alone cannot eliminate discrimination and violence. They must work with NGOs, faith groups, civil society and also the private sector. This is the only way that cultural and traditional practices which are perpetuating discrimination and violence against girls can be challenged and overcome.